

Christmas recipes

In this fantastic festive guide, ethnobotanist James Wong challenges us to think differently about the plants that we traditionally use just to decorate our houses at Christmas. Forget a bit of limp greenery around the mantelpiece - James transforms his favourite festive plants into natural remedies to tackle your winter coughs and colds and combat your seasonal overindulgence, and makes cheap but original gifts with health-giving properties.

Among the recipes you'll find here are a hot toddy made from fir needles and echinacea-infused rum, a fizzy sherbet containing rosehip and ginger which will help relieve a hangover, roasted cranberry mince pies. And for gifts, how about a body oil and a toning cream?

Fir Tree and Calamondin Hot Toddy

Note: Use fir needles from the Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) or Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*.)

For the echinacea-infused rum: g fresh echinacea root (or 10g if using dried) ml white rum

For the hot toddy: ml fir needles star anise calamondin oranges or 1 lime, sliced ml boiling water
tbsp eucalyptus honey Pinch of black pepper shot (28ml) echinacea-infused rum (see ingredients above) tsp unsalted butter

1. To make the echinacea-infused rum, combine the echinacea root and the rum and leave to steep in a cool, dark place for 2 weeks. Strain out the echinacea and bottle up. The mixture will keep in a cool, dark place for up to 1 year.
2. To make the hot toddy, strip the needles from the fir branches until you have 120ml.
3. Put the needles in a teapot or bowl with the star anise and sliced calamondin oranges or lime, honey and black pepper. Pour over the freshly boiled water. Cover and leave to steep for 15 minutes.
4. Strain into a pan, and reheat on the stove.
5. Once reheated, add the echinacea-infused rum and butter until melted. Stir, then serve in a large cup.

USE: For adults, drink 1 cup only in the evening or before bedtime.

CAUTION: Contains alcohol. Consideration should be made when driving.

STORAGE: Best made fresh for use at once.

Rosehip and Ginger Fizzy Sherbet - For Hangovers

50g fresh rosehips tsp Maldon salt tsp dried ground ginger tsp citric acid tsp bicarbonate of soda tbsp glucose

1. Preheat the oven to 80°C (180°F), or its lowest setting.
2. Bash the rosehips in a mortar and pestle to break them up slightly. This will split the fruit - remove the seeds and discard.

3. Add the salt to the split hips and give them another quick bash with the pestle. The goal is just to break them up a little, not turn them into mush.
4. Scatter the rosehips on a baking tray and put in the oven at 80°C (180°F). Immediately turn off the heat and leave in the oven for half an hour or so until they are dried but not burnt.
5. Remove the dried hips from the oven and grind to a fine powder in a spice grinder. Mix with all other ingredients, then store in an airtight container.

USE: Add half of the sherbet to 1 litre of warm water. Stir and drink freely.

STORAGE: Provided it is completely dry, this will keep in an airtight container in a cool, dark place for up to 6 months.

Pick Me Up Yerba Mate and Chilli Truffles

2 medium dried chillies or ½ tsp ground chilli flakes
vanilla pod, split in half
whole allspice
tbsp eucalyptus honey
g yerba mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*)
tea leaves
litre boiling water
g dark chocolate (85% cocoa solids)
tsp soft brown sugar
tsp cocoa powder

1. Mix the chilli, vanilla pod, allspice and honey together in a pan, then add the yerba mate and boiling water. Simmer until the liquid reduces to approximately 150ml - this will take about 45 minutes. Strain and leave to cool to room temperature.
2. Put the chocolate in a glass heat-proof bowl, and melt over a pan of hot water.
3. Stir the cooled mate mixture into the melted chocolate, then refrigerate until it takes on a fudge-like consistency (about 30 minutes).
4. Mix the soft brown sugar and cocoa powder in a shallow bowl. Scoop a teaspoon of the truffle mixture and roll into a small ball, then roll in the sugar/cocoa powder to coat. Place each coated truffle in a small paper case. Repeat until all the mixture is used.
5. Once reheated, add the echinacea-infused rum and butter until melted. Stir, then serve in a large cup.

USE: This one is mainly for adults, because of the caffeine, but you can let older children have one or two! Don't eat more than 6 a day.

CAUTION: Contains caffeine.

STORAGE: Keep in the refrigerator. Eat within 1 week.

Ivy, Juniper and Grapefruit Toning Cream

50g fresh ivy leaves (*Hedera helix*)
ml gin
Peel of 2 grapefruit
drops juniper essential oil
tbsp sunflower oil
tsp emulsifying wax
tsp beeswax

1. Preheat the oven to 80°C (180°F), or its lowest setting.
2. Wash the ivy leaves, pat dry, and chop roughly. Place on a baking tray and put in the oven for 1 hour.
3. Blitz the dried ivy leaves in a blender with the gin, grapefruit peel and juniper essential oil.

Strain through a sieve into a bowl to remove all fibre, squeezing the pulp with your hands to extract as much liquid as possible.

4. Heat the sunflower oil, emulsifying wax and beeswax in a heatproof glass bowl above a pan of boiling water until all the wax has melted. Take off the heat and slowly whisk in the ivy liquid, 1 tablespoon at a time. Pour into glass jars and leave to cool.

USE: Apply to legs once or twice a day for up to 3 weeks. Then take a two-week break before using again.

CAUTION: For external use only. Do not use if you are allergic to ivy.

STORAGE: Keep in the refrigerator. Use within 2 months.

Roasted Cranberry Mince Pies

1 kg cranberries, fresh or frozen Bramley apple, chopped tsp mixed spice g unsalted butter ml maple syrup g soft brown sugar tbsp dark rum or Cointreau g candied orange peel Flour, for dusting rolls ready-made shortcrust pastry Icing sugar, to dredge

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F).
2. Distribute the cranberries and chopped apple between two roasting tins. Sprinkle over the mixed spice and fleck with the butter. Drizzle the maple syrup over. Roast in the oven for 25-30 minutes, or until the fruit is slightly shrunken with a golden tan.
3. Remove the roasted cranberries from the oven and place in a bowl. Mix in the sugar, rum or Cointreau and candied orange peel.
4. Sprinkle flour onto a work surface and roll out the pastry to a thickness of about 3mm. Using a 7cm cookie-cutter, cut out discs of pastry and place into a greased mince pie tin. Prick the base of each pie with a fork and bake in the oven for 15 minutes.
5. Remove from the oven, and spoon the cranberry filling into each pastry cup. Return to the oven to cook for another 5 minutes.
6. Leave the pies to cool, then dredge with icing sugar.

USE: Eat 1 or 2 pies a day.

STORAGE: Store in an airtight container and eat within 1 week.

Anti-Anxiety Saffron Egg Nog

500ml whole milk bay leaves threads / 3 pinches saffron strips orange rind tbsp golden syrup ml single cream eggs ml white rum Grated fresh nutmeg, to serve

1. Pour the milk, bay leaves, saffron, orange rind, golden syrup and cream into a pan, and simmer gently for 10 minutes. Strain through a sieve.
2. Break the eggs into a glass heat-proof bowl, then slowly whisk in the hot milk mixture.
3. Place the bowl above a pan of boiling water and heat gently, stirring, until the mixture thickens to a custardy consistency. Then take it straight off the heat.

4. Whisk in the rum, then pour the mixture into a jug. Cool, then leave to stand in the refrigerator for at least 8 hours before serving.
5. Serve over ice with grated nutmeg.

USE: Drink no more than 1 wineglass a day.

CAUTION: Contains alcohol.

STORAGE: Keep in the refrigerator. Will last for 2 weeks.

Fennel Sugar Mice for Flatulence

2 egg whites g icing sugar g dessicated coconut tbsp fennel seeds drops peppermint essential oil A few drops homemade natural colourings (optional): - for pink, use beetroot juice or blackberry jam - for yellow, use turmeric - for green, use juice pressed from chopped parsley

To decorate: Cloves for eyes Pumpkin seeds for ears String for tails

1. Beat the egg whites until frothy but not stiff. Stir in the sieved icing sugar, coconut, fennel seeds and peppermint essential oil, and mix until the mixture forms a firm dough. (Feel free to add more sugar if the mixture is not stiff enough to hold its shape.)
2. Knead in a few drops of colouring (optional).
3. Form the dough into 21 little mice shapes - greasing your hands lightly with sunflower oil beforehand helps immensely with this. Place cloves for eyes, pumpkin seeds for ears and string for tails. Arrange the mice on a sheet of greaseproof paper and leave in a warm, dry place to harden for 24 hours.

USE: When windy, eat 1-2 mice per day, remembering to remove the cloves first.

STORAGE: Will keep in an airtight tin for up to 6 weeks.

Orange-Scented Body Oil

The fragrance of Christmas - orange, cloves and exotic myrrh - in a bottle. This luxury body oil makes the most of myrrh's anti-inflammatory properties: apply liberally to moisturize and nourish dry skin, or use as a sweet-smelling massage lotion.

Peel of 5 oranges or tangerines tbsp cloves ml sunflower oil tbsp myrrh resin

1. Put the orange peel, cloves and sunflower oil into a blender and whizz until smooth.
2. Pour the mixture into a glass heatproof bowl and place over a pan of boiling water. Add the myrrh, then cover and leave to simmer for 1 hour, making sure the pan does not boil dry.
3. Take off the heat and leave to cool. Strain the mixture and bottle up.

USE: Apply as needed to dry skin, or use for massage.

STORAGE: Will keep in a dark cool place for up to 3 months.

